Are Allies Worth It?

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Allies can be a pain. In the air war over Kosovo, French intervention in target selection is said to have reduced air strike effectiveness and slowed the war at times to a crawl. In the 2002 elections, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder broke a promise to the Bush administration not to use opposition to American policy on Iraq for domestic political gain; one German minister even compared the administration's policies to Hitler's. The French, German, and Belgian governments tried to deny Turkey the NATO air defense assets Turkey felt it needed for security against possible Iraqi attack; this effort threatened the central mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty, and all for the apparent purpose of frustrating American policy toward Iraq. Recent French diplomacy in the UN Security Council has seemed more concerned with containing America than containing Saddam.

Neoconservative intellectuals respond to this aggravation by advocating self-help: we are powerful enough to secure our interests ourselves, they argue. With no real need for allied contributions, we can spare ourselves the headaches of accommodating self-interested interference from feckless Europeans and do the job ourselves, the right way, without the least-common-denominator compromises inherent in combined operations. All the Europeans can do anyway, they argue, is peacekeeping and nation building, and most of the latter can be outsourced: Haliburton and Bechtel can be paid to do the rebuilding we would otherwise have to route through the UN or NATO, and whereas the UN would bog down in ineffectual bureaucracy, private contractors will do the job right.

Others argue that even if we do need help with chores like nation building or peace keeping we can still safely ignore allied preferences until we actually need the help. When the war ends, allied firms will want a part of the reconstruction jackpot; to get some say over postwar events, allies will swallow their pride and ante up the peacekeeping contribution they need to get a seat at the table. And if so, then why tolerate their interference in the conduct of war or prewar diplomacy – especially at the cost of American lives lost in muddled, politically-correct warfighting by committee?

Yet there are good reasons – rooted in cold, hard American self-interest – to make a practice of compromising with our allies, accepting their involvement in American military action, and deferring periodically to their preferences – even when this causes us to accept policies we don't like. In fact, it is essential that we periodically accept policies we don't like but that our allies do.

In part this is because we need allies' cooperation in ways that we can't readily coerce by threats of exclusion from postwar influence. The War on Terrorism, for example, turns heavily on quiet, behind-the-scenes intelligence cooperation. Our allies often know far more about al Qaeda's operations than we do; we rely on them to share what they know so we can act. This cooperation is not always in our partners' perceived self-interest, narrowly defined. States risk compromising intelligence sources and methods when they share secrets; moreover, not all our allies want the kind of aggressive pursuit or incarceration of al Qaeda operatives that we prefer. By most reports, our allies generally have been very cooperative on these points to date. But they

could easily choose otherwise. And if they did, it would be very hard to coerce cooperation: we don't know what secrets they aren't sharing with us, so how do we know whether to implement threatened sanctions? Intelligence sharing in the War on Terrorism is thus critical but hard to obtain without voluntary compliance. Allies cooperate voluntarily when it isn't in their immediate self-interest because they expect reciprocity: they help us because they think we might help them later. Disregarding our allies' interests whenever we find their preferences inconvenient is not a way to motivate voluntary intelligence sharing.

Postwar reconstruction and stabilization is another area where we may want cooperation but find it hard to coerce. Our allies do indeed want the influence that comes with participation; if we offer involvement they may accept it even after a war waged over their objections. Yet many in Europe now apparently believe that America is a potential threat to their interests and must be contained. If containing us becomes a primary goal, what better way to tie us down than by forcing us to commit the lion's share of our own military to postwar stabilization in Iraq or Afghanistan? Many Americans opposed assisting the Russians in destroying their missiles or WMD on the grounds that this freed Russian resources for use in more aggressive purposes; the same logic can apply to us in reverse from a French or Russian perspective. Every French or Russian soldier assigned to peacekeeping duties in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Kosovo, or Bosnia is potentially an American soldier freed for what the French or Russians may worry could become military adventurism in Iran or North Korea. If we persuade others that we will act against their interests and without their input, we can hardly expect them to help us free up resources for doing so.

The most important reason to accommodate allies, however, is the least immediate: if we consistently ignore our allies' interests, we could create a balancing alliance to threaten our sole superpower status in coming decades. Historically, states have not long tolerated gross imbalances of power. To prevent any one from becoming too strong, the others realign as necessary to balance against the strongest. Among the post Cold War era's greatest puzzles has been the absence to date of this historical balancing dynamic against America. In principle, other states could counter American power: the combined GDP of NATO Europe, Russia, and China is about equal to ours; add India and it exceeds ours. Yet the combined defense expenditure of all these together is about half of ours, and to date their foreign policies have certainly not been aligned to oppose us. They could do it – they've chosen not to. Why not? Most scholars believe the answer is in threat perception: whereas past hegemons have been seen by others as dangerous, America has so far been seen as benign. But this can change. The sheer speed of the downward spiral in our relations with France and Germany in just the last six months alone has been breathtaking. Polling data suggests that most Frenchmen now see George W. Bush as a greater threat than Saddam Hussein. Is it really so implausible that a generation of American steamrolling of allied preferences couldn't produce a major shift in foreign perceptions of our intent?

What must we do now to forestall this possibility? And how much of a price should we bear to head off a long-term danger that may never materialize? The key near-term requirement is to act in ways that periodically demonstrate our real intent to allies who may doubt our good will. We're convinced that American intentions will always remain defensive and that America harbors no designs on others' freedom or resources. But others cannot know this with anything like the same certainty. They judge our intentions from our actions as they perceive them, and may change their judgments based on what they think they see. The best way to affect their

perceptions is to let them see that we take their interests into account even at a real cost to us. That is, we need to compromise, for real, on issues that actually matter to our allies and actually cost us something, at least often enough to prevent hostile perceptions from taking shape. This doesn't mean we have to give away the store on matters central to our security – but it does mean that we have to give enough to make it clear that we've incurred a real cost on behalf of our allies' interests rather than simply our own.

A good example is the aggravation of combined operations. Giving allies a role in target selection or operational planning can reduce our effectiveness and efficiency. But it also demonstrates to them that we're not a loose cannon beyond their influence. The near-term cost in reduced efficiency must be balanced against the long-term benefit of maintaining a relationship with other states that averts grave shifts in their view of America's benign intentions, and thus forestalls the development of balancing coalitions in opposition to American interests. Sometimes, on balance, the aggravation won't be worth it, but sometimes it will. And the deciding factor won't merely be whether the allies contribute military power that we need to defeat the enemy. The politics of perception can sometimes be as important as the military logic of capability.

On this score, the die is now largely cast in Iraq. But Iraq may not be the last campaign in the War on Terrorism. Iraq has already driven a wedge between us and some of our strongest historical allies. As a result, attitudes around the Army and elsewhere are in danger of hardening into reflexive opposition to the messy give and take that is fundamental to alliance politics and combined operations. It would be a serious mistake to allow such attitudes to become conventional wisdom. Among the strategist's central responsibilities is to look into the future and to take steps today to shape the geostrategic environment of tomorrow. And among our biggest stakes in tomorrow's geopolitics is to prevent the emergence of a hostile force with the power to threaten a new Cold War or, worse, a possible World War III. Happily, this prospect seems pretty remote today. Our job is to keep it remote. And by comparison with the danger of a great power strategic realignment against us, the aggravation of dealing with allies and accommodating their preferences is a small price to pay.